

HR Corner

Interactional intelligence

by Charles Mak



Edward Wong, general manager, human resources
Hutchison Telecommunications (Hong Kong) Limited
Photo: Nolly Leung

Telecommunications giant balances workforce stability and staff mobility

As a result of the current economic boom, corporations across the board are faced with the daunting prospect of talent shortage. On the one hand, competitive employers are seeking to maintain a stable workforce; a growing number, on the other, is pulling out all the stops to mobilise staff within the company to maintain interest and inspire. "Staff mobility can be healthy, particularly for accelerating businesses like ours," says Edward Wong, general manager, human resources, Hutchison Telecommunications (Hong Kong) Limited (HTHK).

Currently, HTHK employs more than 1,000 staff for its various brands which have their own unique attributes and competitive values. Opportunities for internal transfer within HTHK or intra-group transfer under the roof of Hutchison Whampoa Limited are therefore abundant.

"Staff in key functions may opt for opportunities elsewhere at any given time, but we always welcome their return to base with anticipation," Mr Wong says, adding however that staff in certain positions should be retained as far as possible.

Qualitative approach

New recruits bring new thinking. When hiring, HTHK emphasises spotting a "young at heart" mindset. "Our business changes so fast that our staff must possess market sensitivity and remain poised to embrace emerging trends and surmount challenges," Mr Wong remarks.

He believes that no existing assessment apparatus can replace face-to-face interaction, which allows candidates to demonstrate their values and background. "Direct conversation, case studies, behavioural assessment and sharing give us a glimpse of the personality attributes of individual candidates, whether they are fresh graduates or experienced professionals," Mr Wong explains.

"Aptitude tests may be required for certain positions but these would be for reference only. We much prefer assessing candidates using a qualitative rather than a quantitative approach. A team of passionate and dedicated people can promote a positive atmosphere, which in turn fosters a healthy and innovative workforce."

The same philosophy applies to the company's performance management system. "Performance appraisal is a not just a formality. In particular, we look for evidence of model behaviour, attitudes and soft skills, such as the ability to work as a team across departments," Mr Wong says. "The evaluation process as a constructive event should be enjoyed, respected and valued by both managers and staff. Through such initiatives we expect staff to share their career aspirations and identify areas for improvement with their supervisors."

"Performance appraisal is a not just a formality"

Concerted effort

While some staff aspire to climb the corporate ladder, others remain content at their current stations. In Mr Wong's opinion, both types of employee are company assets. "Everybody has a place in HTHK and they work well in their preferred functions according to differing aspirations. It is important for the company and its staff to reach mutual understanding, plan for the future and look for development opportunities or alternatives if necessary," he says.

HTHK customer relations officer Evita Chan's career best demonstrates this. Ms Chan joined the company in 1989 as one of 500 paging service operators. A few years later she became a senior supervisor, won a "Best Service Award in Telecommunications Service" in 1996 and later made a horizontal move to the mobile hotline working on different products and systems.

"My manager and the customer service director helped me stretch my potential to the full," Ms Chan recalls. One year later, she was transferred to the company's newly established customer resolution department where she has stayed for the last eight years, now overseeing the daily operation of nearly 100 staff.

In recognition of her service to both HTHK and the industry as a whole, she has received a "Customer Relationship Excellence Award (Customer Service Centre)" and a "Customer Service Team Leader Merit Award" from the Asia Pacific Customer Service Consortium.

She reveals that all internal transfers are paired with appropriate training. To prepare her for the current role, HTHK organised a range of management programmes and workshops. She says, "Even today I still enrol myself in some of the company's regular training programmes as well as external ones." In fact, she completed a diploma in customer service management at the Hong Kong Management Association in 2005.

Mr Wong emphasises that with sufficient training, single-skilled staff like Ms Chan can become multi-skilled and move forwards. "This also confirms that staff mobility and stability can take place simultaneously," he concludes.

Salient points

- Qualitative not quantitative approach
- Loyalty and diligence rewarded
- Mobility and stability promoted simultaneously

Taken from *Career Times* 9 May 2008, p. A20

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